

Fifty refugees die in ship's hold in new Mediterranean migrant tragedy

By Robert Stevens
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Around 50 refugees and asylum seekers were found dead in the hold of a boat off the coast of Libya Wednesday morning. While rescuers were able to save 439 other people on board, the latest reports indicated that 51 people had died.

According to the Italian coast guard, the Swedish ship Poseidon, working as part of the European Union's border control agency Frontex, discovered the bodies after it went to a stricken wooden boat that was in difficulty.

The latest number of fatalities is similar to the 49 migrants who perished on August 15 in the hold of another boat. That vessel was also found off the Libyan coast, south of the Italian island of Lampedusa. Those deaths are thought to have been caused by the migrants being asphyxiated after inhaling fumes from fuels as the boat's hold took on water.

The nationality of those who died Wednesday has not yet been reported, but they are almost certainly from the war zones of Syria, Afghanistan, Libya or other African countries. Hundreds of thousands of the many millions who have been made refugees are seeking to reach Europe from throughout the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. They are fleeing as the result of more than a decade of wars and carnage, carried out by the imperialist powers and their proxies. An estimated 10 million people have been made homeless in Syria alone.

The vast scale of the crimes of imperialism is evident by the enormous numbers attempting to cross the Mediterranean every day. At least 2,300 have died trying to make the crossing this year, in what has been designated the most dangerous journey for any refugee on the globe.

Streams of refugees have attempted to seek shelter in Europe, mainly via the continent's southern states,

Italy and Greece. According to the International Organization for Migration, 293,000 refugees and migrants have reached Europe by sea so far this year. This is already one-third more than the total that arrived in 2014.

Also Wednesday, Italian rescue services received 10 calls for help from various boats in difficulty. The calls were from vessels located in an area around 30 miles from the Libyan coast, according to the Italian coastguard. It said at least 2,000 migrants, and "probably more" were in danger. These included an Irish coast guard ship attempting to rescue up to 500 people from a boat. That day:

- * An Italian coast guard vessel saved 113 people from a partially-deflated rubber boat. One passenger, already fighting to survive, died soon after.

- * Poseidon, the same rescue vessel that found the dead bodies in the hold, earlier saved 130 people from a rubber boat.

- * A merchant ship reportedly picked up 225 people.

The local .it web site reported yesterday that according to Italian sources, "another boat with some 700 people aboard was in trouble in the same area. Moas, a Malta-based private organisation, said in a tweet that its boat, the Phoenix, was taking part in a complex rescue operation."

Moas tweeted, "Phoenix are working with Italian and Swedish vessels to assist thousands."

This year Greece overtook Italy as the country receiving the most migrants. So far, more than 160,000 have entered the country, whose population is impoverished due to years of savage austerity. As well as the Mediterranean crossing from Africa, thousands are making the shorter but still dangerous trip to Greece's eastern Aegean islands, via the Turkish coast.

In the 24 hours until Wednesday morning, the Greek

coastguard rescued 578 people in 15 separate incidents at sea near the islands of Lesbos, Chios, Samos and Kos. These figures did not include those now arriving daily, often in unsafe inflatable dinghies, from the Turkish coast.

Just days earlier, on August 22, Italian coastguard teams rescued 4,400 people, a record number, in 22 operations over a single 24-hour period. This followed the rescue of 5,300 migrants off the Libyan coast the previous week.

The 22 rescue operations were carried out in seas near Libya. According to AP, Italian coast guard, navy and border police boats as well as Norwegian and Irish naval vessels co-ordinated the rescues. Those rescued were travelling on unseaworthy boats and motorized rubber dinghies, all overcrowded with desperate men, women and children.

The rescues took place in a relatively small area around 30 miles (50 km) from the Libyan coast. That so many had to be rescued in such a tiny area of sea in the eastern Mediterranean, which covers a total area of 637,000 square miles (1.65 million square kilometres), highlights the scope of this vast movement of refugees, which is without parallel since World War II.

Some 110,000 migrants have been rescued off the Libyan coast and taken to southern Italian ports.

Those who manage to enter Europe are being treated as an invading army to be repelled by brute force. As news was emerging of the latest tragic deaths, Hungarian riot police reported to have attacked around 200 migrants in the town of Roszke, near the border with Serbia. According to the AFP, police were sent in “after migrants tried to leave the main processing centre without being fingerprinted...”

The agency added, “Tensions escalated after more than 2,500 people, the highest ever daily total, arrived in Hungary on Tuesday from non EU-member Serbia.”

As with those refugees reaching Greece and Italy, most of the 100,000 migrants arriving in Hungary, via various routes in the Balkans, are fleeing their devastated homes in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan.

To stop refugees and migrants entering, Hungary’s right-wing government is constructing a massive, 109-mile fence on its border with Serbia. On Wednesday, it announced that 2,100 police officers would be sent to guard the fence.

This is just the initial stage of repression. Hungary’s

ruling party said Wednesday it would ask parliament to back sending the army to help seal its southern border. Szilard Nemeth, deputy head of the National Security parliamentary committee, said the ruling Fidesz party wants to “make possible the use of the army for tasks related to border defence and migration.”

Every day features new reports of the latest harrowing tragedy engulfing refugees in the Mediterranean.

In June, the EU held a summit to discuss the escalating crisis. This was prompted by a wave of public revulsion at the indifference of the European powers, in the face of a series of mass drownings of refugees in which hundreds of lives were lost. The assembled heads of state failed to agree on a policy, clashing over whether to set quotas for how many immigrants each country should take.

On Monday, German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande met in Berlin to discuss the refugee crisis. They threatened to put the entire Balkan region on the list of “safe countries” into which no immigrants would be accepted. This would increase pressure on governments in the Balkans to step up their already savage repression of refugees.

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